# TV in transition Digital television will soon be the standard. Is your set compatible? BY KEVIN SAVETZ

**In just a few years, television will be very different. Yes, you'll still be able to take in the game or enjoy the guilty pleasure of your favorite reality show. But the** technology inside that TV will be a generation ahead of the set you watch today.

Digital television is coming. In the United States, Congress has set 2006 as the year that it wants traditional analog broadcasts to stop. That deadline may slip by a year or two in some areas, but the writing is on the wall. In two to four years, your analog television won't work, at least not without a device that converts the digital signal to analog.

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> – William Duhamel

So analog television is a ticking time bomb. What should you do if you need or want a new television now? It's a conundrum: You can invest in a television that will be obsolete in a couple of years, or you can buy a more expensive digital set with features you might not be able to enjoy until then.

William Duhamel, owner of four television stations in Nebraska, South Dakota, and Wyoming and a member of the Rotary Club of Rapid City, S.D., suggests buying a television that will work for the long haul.

"If I were buying today, I wouldn't buy anything other than a digital HDTV with a 16:9 aspect ratio," Duhamel says.

For the jargon-impaired – which is most of the television-buying public – a bit of education is in order. "HDTV" stands for high-definition television, which delivers images of much greater clarity than standard TVs. (Some "enhanced definition" sets on the market offer a middle ground but aren't compatible with tomorrow's high-definition standard.) Aspect ratio refers to the ratio of the picture's length to its width. Most of today's standard TVs have a squarish 4:3 aspect ratio. Digital high-definition broadcasts will use 16:9, a wider image similar to that of a movie-theater screen.

There are still other choices to be made: Do you need a set with a digital tuner? Flat screen? Plasma? As the television landscape changes, consumers are sure to be baffled for a while.

"It's confusing right now," Duhamel says. "I'm appalled at the [lack of] knowledge of some sales people as they try to explain these things."

But digital television will bring new benefits. In addition to a sharper image and improved sound, digital TV will mean more channels. Each television station will be able to carry up to six channels of video. So a viewer without cable or satellite but with access to five local broadcast channels could have up to 30 channels. It's not entirely clear how those extra channels will be used – perhaps for 24-hour local weather and traffic information or reruns.

If your living room TV gives up the ghost today, the awkward choice remains: cheaper analog or expensive digital?

"The prices are coming down amazingly fast," Duhamel says. Some high-definition 16:9 models now cost under $1,000. (High-end models with flat plasma screens run $3,000 and up.)

If you don't watch much TV or just can't fathom spending that much, go easy on your wallet. Analog sets are less expensive than ever. When digital broadcasts usurp analog, you'll have to pony up for a converter box (which are expected to cost around $50 but won't improve the picture to HDTV quality) or buy a digital TV, which will be much more affordable by then.

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